What Does It Cost to Belong to Your Church?
Luke 9:23-25, 57-62
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Fascinating conversations often happen in unlikely places. In a barber-shop recently, having just learned that I was a minister and therefore feeling severely curtailed in the range of topics about which we could converse comfortably, someone said,"Well, I guess yours is one business that hasn't been hit by inflation". It was an interesting comment: untrue, of course, because inflation does effect the Church in the same way it does everybody else, only more so.

But it set me to thinking about those few instances in my life when someone has asked, bluntly, "What does it cost to belong to your Church?" Sometimes the question comes circuitiously; "What's your policy on giving to the Church, Reverend?" or "How much do people in your Church contribute?" And sometimes it comes directly: "OK, I'll join. But what's it going to cost me?"

Now, the people who ask the question in that straight forward, no-nonsense manner are ordinarily prospective members and they betray immediately their lack of experience with the institutional Church. They have not yet learned that minimal ecclesiastical etiquette dictates against talking honestly and realistically about money. They have not yet learned the language of the Church which encourages wild exaggeration: the special vocabulary of Stewardship which invokes words like "sacrifice, dedication and commitment" and attaches them to performance which, in the case of United Presbyterian Church last year, amounted to $127.00 per member or just a little more than the average American loses and misplaces each year.

In any case, whenever someone is so bold or naive to ask me directly "What does it cost to belong to your Church?" I'm momentarily stumped. And I do what I expect you would do - or have done. I clear my throat and after a thoughtful pause rephrase the question in more palatable terms of the Church budget and pledge practices. In so many words I say that the Church of Jesus Christ will receive with gratitude whatever you think you can afford, which is simply a way of saying that there is no cost at all. The trouble is, that is not true: it is misleading and unfair and worse yet, it is directly contrary to what we know about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Think again, for instance, about the New Testament Lesson this morning. Jesus, if you will pardon the analogy, had three prospective followers on His hands. He was on His way to Jerusalem and the price He would pay for His commitment was becoming clearer by the minute. He knew the sort of thing that was likely to happen when He entered the capital city.

It is in this setting, that we watch in amazement as He deals with the three prospects. The first man volunteered. Luke uses a peculiar idiom to describe Jesus' decision to move the locus of His ministry from the Galilean country side to the city. He "set His face toward Jerusalem". Caught up in the passion and bravery of that commitment the man stepped forward: "I will follow you wherever you go". Jesus told him, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head". That is to say, the man was so captivated by the emotion of the moment that he had not calculated the cost. Men need the sustaining comfort of a home, and in all integrity, Jesus could not promise even that. To follow Him at that moment meant the payment of a rather dear price.

The second man was called. Jesus found his face in the crowd and said, "Follow me". The man was not unwilling, but had business to attend - important business: "Let me go first and bury my father". This was no lame excuse. If the man's father had died it was his legal duty to arrange the burial. If he was elderly and ill, it was the son's moral responsibility to take care of him. Jesus replied,"Leave the dead to bury the dead: as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God".

Now a third man, perhaps having heard what had transpired, stepped forward. He too was willing. He too was moved by this brave and lonely man walking to his destiny. "I'll come, Lord, just as soon as I say good-bye to my family. I'll be there - wait for me". And Jesus said, "No one who sets his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God".

Three prospects - no followers. Jesus was either terribly impractical, or He was callous to the understandably human concerns of these three men, or else He was at this point (- Remember that the stakes were getting higher with each successive step He took toward Jerusalem) revealing something very important about the nature of Christian faith..... I think it is the latter. I do not believe Jesus was insensitive. I believe He was defining faith as following Him; and following as radical obedience in a particular situation that could and did prove to be very costly.

I think He was laying the foundation for that understanding earlier when He told His disciples: "If a man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it".

What does it cost to belong to your Church? If we are willing to define belonging to the Church as following Jesus, and if we are willing to allow Him to respond, the answer is "Everything. Everything you have: you must lose your life, figuratively speaking, and there may be occasions when that will happen literally."

Can you imagine what would happen to the institutional Church if we were to advertise that as the condition for membership? There is, obviously, a most conspicuous gap between the rigid standards of discipleship taught by Jesus and the reality of belonging to the contemporary Church. Part of the reason is pragmatic. Stephen Rose has observed that the most important fact about the Church is that we are still here. What he meant was that the New Testament was written against the back drop of the expectation that history was about to end - and so there is not much in the New Testament about the life of an institution that lives in history - indefinitely... .... The Church is an institution with buildings and programs and professional staff and in this form, at least, it is rather dependent on the voluntary contributions of its members. Put as plainly as I know how, it may be more satisfying theologically to receive one member who will give $50.00 a week to the mission of the Church and lay down his life, but pragmatically speaking, the institution functions better with ten souls who will give $10.00 a week and come to worship on occasion.

But that is just part of the reason for the gap between the New Testament standard and the reality of the Church. Another part, I believe, is that by nature Americans are not comfortable submitting to authority. It is our genius and our weakness. Wallace Fisher writes: "The American is a true child of the enlightenment, which stressed man's freedom from authority...Like his fellow citizen, the American churchman also loves his freedom. His is undisciplined, indisposed to accept authority. He is loath to accept any external standard of judgment upon his person, ideas or actions". (Politics, Poker and Piety. P.86-87)

That, I would suggest, is part of the reason. We are undisciplined Christians and we like it that way. Part of the reason, also, is that peculiar phenomonon in America that sociologists have identified as "Religion in general". We fancy ourselves a Christian nation, whatever that means. 96% of us believe in God but less than 50% of us go to Church. We pray at the drop of a hat - in Jesus' name - at football games, P.T.A. meetings, athletic banquets. Everyone in America, it is assumed, is Christian, or at least vaguely religious, so why bother being a disciplined churchman?

Part of the reason also, for the gap between Jesus' definition of following and belonging to the church has to do with a subtle perversion of Reformed Theology. Protestantism, and particularly Presbyterianism, leans heavily on the theology of grace. Historically we were born in a time when the grace of God had become shackled by the Church and its Clergy. Salvation was available to a man in direct ratio to the thoroughness with which he conformed to the rules and rituals of the Church. Martin Luther was a man of his time, a priest of the church, who rediscovered the Gospel of Grace: that is, the Good News that man is saved by the love of God and nothing that he has done for himself. That is the theological basis of what happened in the 16th century - and the continuing genius of Protestantism. An exiled French scholar by the name of John Calvin thought it out brilliantly in a mammoth work entitled "The Institutes of the Christian Religion" in which he said over and over again that God comes to man, God saves man, God awakens faith in man, God's primary characteristic is his free and unmerited grace.

And so there is historic precedent for we Presbyterians digging our heels in a bit whenever it sounds as if the Church is attaching conditions to God's love, telling us we must do this or that in order to be saved. We've been there before. But what we forget, conveniently, I might add, is that the reformers themselves were paying a terrible price for their discipleship even as they taught the Gospel of Grace. Luther was excommunicated from his church and branded an outlaw. Calvin was an exile from his native land and also a criminal. It would have been totally alien to these men to suggest that faith was not costly.

We are correct when we refuse to agree to the notion that giving money to the Church, or doing anything else for that matter, is the way to earn God's love. But we are wrong, when we push that theology to the breaking point by concluding that Christian discipleship costs nothing: that belonging to the Church is cheap: that following Christ is something we can do casually, hesitantly, half-heartedly.

That's the dilemma. The Church must announce that good news of God's love. And it must call men,in the name of Jesus Christ, to discipleship - the costly business of following: both at the same time.

When we compromise: when we indicate by words - by the style of our ministry - that it costs nothing to be a Christian - or a Church member - the result is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace".

Arthur McCay once quoted the favorite hymn "Take Thou ourselves dear Lord, heart, mind and will. Through our surrendered souls, Thy plan fulfill. We yield ourselves to Thee, time, talents, all. We hear, and henceforth heed, Thy sovereign call". And then proceeds to speculate about the thoughts of a churchman leaving the sanctuary, having just sung the hymn: "Look, God, I didn't mean that literally. I can give some praise if there's nothing more directly related to my interests that I must do. I can spend an occasional hour in worship - from time to time, but it isn't always convenient. But God, what I'm really looking for is bargain basement religion.....I'm willing to receive as much as you can give. But I'm looking for religion at a discount".

The final and tragic irony is that we get what we pay for. We are no longer talking about money alone, but about discipleship - that happy, exhilerating knowledge that I am loved of God and that some of God's will for His creation is happening through my life. The final irony is that cheap grace - when we allow it to characterize our church and our churchmanship - is a little like cheating on a test. We may pass and never be caught, but we will have denied ourselves the deep and rich satisfaction of following our Lord.

I suppose no one ever wrote more eloquently about that than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a pastor and professor in pre-war Germany. In one of the most widely read works of theology ever written "The Cost of Discipleship" he called men to a stance of radical obedience. He coined the phrase "cheap grace" and addressed the problems modern churchmen are always raising. He wrote: "Do not say you have not got faith. You will not have it so long as you refuse to take the first step....Unless he obeys a man cannot believe". (P.55-57)

You have heard it before, but let me tell you his story again. When the Nazis came to power Bonhoeffer lost his job at the University of Berlin. And when the war broke out he was teaching in this country. To the horror of his friends he returned to Germany, and although a pacifist at heart joined the resistance and helped to plan the aborted assassination attempt on Hitler's life. He had understood and written "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die"(P.79) He was arrested and from his prison cell came a stream of letters, poems, essays - running through them all the message that Christian Faith is always costly: it always demands sacrifice, obedience..... .... On April 9, 1945 he paid the final price. At the direct order of Heinrich Himmler, Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenburg Concentration Camp a few days before it was liberated by the allies.

God forbid that we should ever be called upon to pay that price. God forgive us for even discussing our financial gift to the Church in the light of that example. But God forbid that we forget the truth - that Christian Faith is costly: that Christ calls us to follow and obey in our time and in our way.

The money we give to our Church does not buy God's love. It is, however, part of the way we follow. It is part of the way we respond in gratitude to God;s goodness, God's love, God's grace. It is not all there is to being a follower of Jesus Christ, but it is an important part. For we are called - you and I - to discipleship: we are called to live our lives following our Lord: to pick up our cross daily.

I am not going to conclude this sermon by asking you to pledge generously to your church. Experience has taught me that most of you have already decided what to do. You have received ample information. You know what the programs and plans are. You know what your Church needs in 1975.

What I would like to ask of you this morning is that you share some of my impatience with cheap grace and discount religion and meaningless church membership. I would like to ask you to think seriously about the call of Jesus Christ as it has come to you to be His disciple: that you think seriously now, but beyond this hour, about His words: "Whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it". I would ask you this morning to open a window in your life - a window that perhaps has been closed - a window through which may pass God's unending love for you, God's grace and good will toward you and your response, your faith, your discipleship.

Amen